

# **Positive Feedback Within a Positive Atmosphere to Promote L2 Use**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This reflective paper addresses the issue of students relying on L1 to communicate within an English discussion class. Through informal observations of an individual class and a review of relevant literature, theories are put forward about why these students chose to code-switch and about when, if ever, L1 should be tolerated in an EFL speaking class. The journal then analyses the perceived effectiveness of different post-activity feedback techniques in encouraging the students to use as much English as possible.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the perennial issues facing the teacher in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting is the extent to which the students are permitted to speak their shared first language. Students in an EFL context often have few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Therefore, for many years the assumption has been that the more English used in the classroom the better. Reasons for this include the arguments that maximum exposure to English and exposure to unexpected English constructions both by peers and teachers better prepares students for English in a real-world setting (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982), and also that communicating only in English fosters the necessary discipline required for learning a new language. In contrast, some researchers have endorsed the idea that allowing students to use L1 may in fact have beneficial effects. These may include reducing the perceived political or imperialistic overtones of banning students from speaking their shared native tongue (Auerbach, 1993), and of fostering an environment in which students feel their own first language is recognised and respected (Brooks-Lewis, 2009). It has also been claimed that there is no solid scientific or pedagogical grounding for banning L1 from the classroom (Spahui, 2013) and that permitting students to clarify task instructions and grammatical points with their partners can improve subsequent performance in L2 (Sa'd, Hattam & Zohre, 2015).

At Rikkyo University all first-year students are required to take English Discussion Class (EDC). This 90 minute a week class follows a functional-notional syllabus and aims to improve students' fluency and discussion skills (Hurling, 2012). Many of the students are assumed to have little chance of using English outside of the classroom and so are encouraged to speak entirely in English during the class. As a teacher of EDC, the author has found that this implementation of an English only policy largely works very well. In general, this seems to match most student expectations of what an English speaking class should be, and, with the aid of paraphrasing skills which are taught to all students as part of the syllabus, has allowed students to take risks with their English and find ways of negotiating meaning without reverting to L1. This is even built into the rubric of the course, with students penalised for speaking Japanese in the two extended discussions in each class and in the three formalised discussion tests each semester. Therefore, in this context it is important to help the students to use L2 as much as possible.

However, occasionally there are classes that struggle to adapt to this style of lesson. Predictably, lower level classes can find it difficult to maintain L2 throughout a whole lesson. This appears most likely due to limited lexical and grammatical resources and perhaps a lack of confidence and motivation. Nevertheless, EDC teachers aspire to equip these students with the necessary functional language chunks and communicative skills to be able to engage in lengthy English-only discussions. In contrast, I found some groups of higher-level students, who appeared

capable of paraphrasing their ideas in L2 and of conversing in English for extended lengths of time, still reverted to L1 reasonably frequently over the course of a lesson. I observed one such class over an extended period and attempted to ameliorate the situation through various techniques based on existing EFL research and reports. Over the course of one fourteen-week semester, I kept a journal detailing the students' behaviour, my impressions, my actions, and the results of my actions as I perceived them. As an active participant, this was somewhat difficult, nevertheless, I did my best to record things as I saw and experienced them. Keeping a teaching journal is a common method of reflective practice which is said to help teachers understand the needs of their students and also help teachers improve real-time decision making in future lessons (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000).

## **DISCUSSION**

The class chosen for this extended observation was of a relatively high standard in comparison to many other groups in EDC. They were from the faculty of business, and all students had scored between 545 and 570 on the TOEIC test. These students had already spent one semester in EDC, and so should have been familiar with the expectation that they converse in English. Furthermore, the students did seem to have the lexical and grammatical range to converse for the full class in English, but at various different points they tended to switch to Japanese and this generally had a knock-on effect in relation to other students also switching to L1. In the initial lessons of the new semester they were reminded regularly about the importance of using English only, however, as some previous research has shown, simply reminding students to stay in the target language is often not enough to achieve the desired effect (Mori, 2004).

It is important not to make assumptions about why students revert to L1 during a lesson (Reimer, 2012); an awareness of the reasons students have for switching-codes during class can help teachers with classroom management and also to gain an understanding of their students' way of thinking (Sa'd et al., 2015). Therefore, through some informal observations during the early part of the course, attempts were made to theorise upon the main reasons students in this particular English Discussion Class were using L1. These impressions were used to shape further reading and to help decide upon methods used to try to reduce use of L1 in following lessons, which are outlined in the following sections.

### **L1 for making small talk**

During the early stages of the lessons and during transitions from one stage of the lesson to another, the students often lapsed into small talk, often not in connection to the day's topic or theme, in Japanese. If L1 use was isolated only to these occasions, and not also found in later group in-task discussion stages of the lesson in which students can lose marks, (students did in fact use L1 sporadically in all stages of the lesson), it may have been possible to overlook this use of L1. However, as has been noted, speaking in a second language is a skill which needs to be practiced in order to be improved (Thornberry, 2006). Furthermore, allowing student use of L1 early on in the learning process can engender an over-reliance on L1 and a reluctance to take risks in L2 (Sa'd et al., 2015). Therefore, due to the aforementioned reasons and EDC's commitment to an English-only policy it was thought necessary to try and ameliorate these instances of L1 in this class.

### **L1 for bridging linguistic knowledge gaps**

In EDC lessons, students are taught various functional phrases to help them negotiate and convey meaning and to paraphrase themselves in L2 when they struggle to come up with the apposite word or phrase. Although the students in this class did sometimes manage to paraphrase and give examples in order to convey their message in English, more often than not they resorted to

Japanese. This seemed to be infectious; when one member of the group broke into L1 others often followed. There were a couple of members of the class who tried to resist this and bring the conversation back into L2, but they seemed to be in the minority. Due to the fact that students' grades in EDC partly relied on them staying in L2 and also because students had shown on some occasions that they were capable of using the functional and communicative language skills taught to them in EDC to avoid using their mother tongue, I thought it was necessary to try to reduce these instances of student L1.

### **L1 for relaying and confirming task instructions**

My observations showed that students occasionally switched to Japanese in order help other students understand what was expected of them in an upcoming task. These instances of L1 were slightly more understandable in that they were 'on task' and showed an intention to help the group complete tasks correctly. Examples included students explaining to their partners how to correctly complete a chart designed to generate ideas for an upcoming group discussion. Various researchers have argued that the use of L1 in a facilitating role to explain grammatical and lexical terms and also to explain instructions can ultimately aid and improve learning outcomes (Alshammari, 2011; Miles, 2004). Consequently, reduction of L1 use in these instances was not considered a priority.

### **Using feedback to highlight L1 and L2 usage**

In order to encourage and help students to use more English when trying to paraphrase and bridge linguistic knowledge-gaps and also to use the target language more generally throughout EDC, different feedback techniques were experimented with over the course of five lessons during the middle of the semester.

As previously mentioned, simple reminders that students should communicate in English and not Japanese did not seem to be particularly effective. Therefore, students were instead given in-class, post-activity feedback which included specific examples of their effective usage of English and also their over-reliance on Japanese. For example, when a student expressed, during a transitional phase of a lesson about media, that they had 'never read a newspaper' the student's language was subsequently given as a positive example of English in the classroom. Throughout the observation period, similar student generated examples of English usage were drawn attention to in post-activity feedback, both verbally and also in written form upon the whiteboard.

Students seemed to respond well to the praise. Moreover, as well as letting the students know that their teacher was closely monitoring their discourse, these instances of positive feedback also served as reminders to the rest of the class about L2 expectations in what hopefully may have felt less nagging than simple in-activity verbal reminders.

In addition, student use of Japanese, both in small talk and when negotiating meaning after failing to do so in English, was also drawn attention to during post-activity feedback. For instance, students who gave up trying to express terms and concepts such as 'regret' and 'useless' in English and simply explained the terms in Japanese. Again, the examples of this student-produced language were given in feedback and suggestions were generated about how the interactions could have been improved by the use of some of the English functional and communicative language already taught to the students during their course. For example, students observed that the English term 'regret' could be communicated by the phrases: 'I mean, I felt bad about my mistake, and I was sorry. Do you understand?' These communicative functions for paraphrasing and checking understanding had been included in the target language of previous EDC lessons.

Despite this example of the students retroactively identifying language to avoid breakdowns in communication, through my informal observations and journal entries it seemed that, overall, drawing negative attention to L1 usage was not as effective as the highlighting of

successful L2 usage. Students did not seem to react well to being singled out, and even when it was not immediately obvious which students were being talked about, the students in question occasionally became slightly withdrawn in the period immediately following the feedback and seemed less likely to experiment with L2 when negotiating meaning.

### **Positive feedback within a positive atmosphere**

Further reading into teaching techniques aimed at encouraging student participation in L2 led this teacher to the tenet that an inclusive and pleasant in-class environment can be a major factor in reducing student anxiety and increasing their willingness to take risks in their use of English (Peng & Woodrow, 2010; Vongsila, 2016). It has also been claimed that students are more confident speaking in an environment they perceive as student-friendly, positive and supportive (Riasati, 2004). With this in mind, a decision was made to halt the instances in which students' lapses into L1 were given as negative examples during feedback but to continue the focus on positive L2 production.

Initially this was difficult. As Lee (2009) explained, despite many teachers' beliefs in the equal importance of feedback relating to both strengths and weaknesses, in practice, many teachers focus more on weaknesses and the correction of errors. And so it was that I initially found it difficult to draw attention exclusively to positive instances of L2 usage and not negative usage of L1. It should also be noted that this feedback had to be condensed into a very short window of time, as it was necessary to centre the majority of post-task feedback on student achievement of stage and lesson aims.

Despite these difficulties, over the final classes of these informal observations it seemed that students continued to respond positively to post-activity feedback in which their successful and creative use of English was highlighted. English usage to negotiate meaning and also to converse more informally between lesson stages was continually exemplified on the board. Lapses into Japanese, for any perceived reasons, were not drawn attention to during the same feedback stages. This atmosphere of encouragement and praise seemed to disinhibit certain students and encourage them to use the linguistic techniques learned on the course to negotiate meaning and to express themselves in English, and not to resort to Japanese anywhere near as much. The fact that students may have been less worried about their language being held up as a 'bad example' may have encouraged them to feel less anxious in class, which may in turn have allowed them to take risks with their language production and paraphrasing.

### **CONCLUSION**

Through this informal analysis of one class's L1 usage and the effect of using feedback to encourage more L2 production, it was noticeable that students responded well to positive post-activity feedback in which attention was drawn to successful examples of their negotiation of meaning and also of small talk in L2. In contrast, when the same thing was done with examples of what the teacher deemed to be unnecessary Japanese usage, students seemed to respond in a negative manner, becoming withdrawn in subsequent lesson stages. It is possible that the positive reinforcement and praise, and absence of reproach and criticism, helped create an encouraging and supportive classroom environment in which students felt comfortable enough to experiment with their production of English. Furthermore, despite the fact that L1 usage when relaying and confirming task instructions was never criticised during feedback, in the final few observed lessons students seemed to use mainly English even when confirming task instructions. This may have been influenced by the aforementioned positive environment in which good usage of L2 was encouraged and praised.

Despite these apparent improvements in the students' production of L2, it is possible that

other factors played a part. At the beginning of the semester the majority of the students were new to one another; studying as a group over the course of many classes may have made the students more comfortable with one another, and, therefore, able to use English without feeling too embarrassed. Another factor may have been their growing familiarity with their teacher and his expectations.

In the future, the same techniques could be employed to test students' responsiveness to positive, targeted feedback in relation to L2 usage and data could be collected in relation to the nature and frequency of the feedback and how students responded to it.

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